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Comparative Study on Pilgrimage Dynamics in Islam, Arbaeen vs. Hajj and the Role of Shiite Theological Evolution : An Introduction to the Realm of Asuras

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Abstract

The Arbaeen pilgrimage has emerged as one of the largest religious gatherings in the world, with approximately 25 million participants in recent years. This pilgrimage, marking the 40th day of mourning for Imam Hussein, has grown to surpass other significant Islamic events such as the Hajj pilgrimage, which hosted approximately 2.5 million pilgrims in the same year (2023). This paper aims to explore the theological, social, and political factors contributing to the rise of Arbaeen as a global phenomenon. Additionally, it contrasts the role of Shiite theology in shaping this event with Sunni interpretations, emphasizing the distinct evolution of Shiite practices under the guidance of religious leadership, particularly in the post-Khomeini era. The paper discusses the concept of divine representation, as seen in the development of the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih, and its implications on Islamic governance and religious practices. Additionally, we discuss the hermeneutics of Ashura and it's relevance to the conflicts in the Middle-East as the proposed realm of Asuras.

Keywords: Arbaeen, Hajj, Shiite, Sunni, Asura

Introduction

In recent years, the Arbaeen pilgrimage has grown to become the largest religious gathering globally, surpassing the Hajj pilgrimage in both scale and religious significance for many Muslims, particularly in the Shiite community. The Hajj, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, is obligatory for Muslims at least once in their lifetime if they can afford it, and it has traditionally been considered the pinnacle of Islamic worship. However, the Arbaeen pilgrimage, centered around the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, has grown in prominence, drawing millions of pilgrims annually to Karbala, Iraq.

According to reports, around 25 million people participated in the Arbaeen pilgrimage last year, compared to approximately 2.5 million pilgrims who performed the Hajj in Mecca during the same

period (Fair Observer, 2023). This sharp contrast in numbers raises questions about the factors contributing to the rise of Arbaeen, its theological underpinnings, and the role of political and religious leadership in shaping Shiite religious practices. This article examines the concept of Arbaeen and it's contrast with interpretations of Sunni Islam. Additionally, we discuss for the first time the hermeneutics of Ashura and it's relevance to Asura demigods in Buddhism as entities who challenge the authority of God.

The concept of Asuras in Buddhism highlights the complexities of existence within samsara and the challenges that arise from negative emotions and desires. Although Asuras are powerful and enjoy certain privileges, their lives are consumed by conflict and dissatisfaction. Their existence serves as a cautionary tale in Buddhist teachings, illustrating that even those with great power and fortune are not immune to the suffering caused by attachment and aversion. By overcoming such destructive tendencies, beings can aspire to higher states of consciousness and ultimately achieve liberation from the cycle of samsara. In this exceptional context, the views of Buddhist and Sunni Muslims, may reflect the reality about the conflicts in the region of Middle-East (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024a)

Theological Underpinnings of Arbaeen and Hajj

Imam Hussein's martyrdom at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE is a pivotal event in Shiite Islam. Shiites believe that Hussein's death represents the ultimate sacrifice for justice and the fight against tyranny, which resonates deeply with the community's historical narrative of persecution and marginalization. As a result, Arbaeen has become not just a religious commemoration but a symbol of resistance against oppression.

Shiite theology places significant emphasis on the veneration of the Imams, particularly Imam Hussein and Imam Ali, often blurring the lines between traditional monotheistic worship and the reverence of semi-divine figures (Momen, 1985). This is reflected in the practices of ziyarat (pilgrimage to the shrines of the Imams) and tawassul (supplication through the Imams), which have evolved into central elements of Shiite worship, often surpassing Sunni theological frameworks that emphasize a more direct relationship with God.

Sunni Perspective on Hajj and Worship

In contrast, Sunni Islam adheres to a more direct interpretation of Quranic monotheism, as reflected in the verse "And to your Lord direct your longing" (Qur'an 94:8). The Hajj pilgrimage, deeply rooted in the Quranic tradition and the practices of Prophet Muhammad, is viewed as a direct expression of devotion to God without intermediaries. Sunni theology generally rejects the veneration of individuals, no matter their historical or religious significance, and focuses on the unity of God (tawhid) as the cornerstone of faith (Ibn Taymiyyah, 2005).

Diverging Theological Paths: The Role of Clergy and Religious Leadership

The prominence of Arbaeen in the contemporary Shiite world, particularly under the leadership of figures such as Ayatollah Khamenei, can be attributed to the institutionalization of Shiite practices through religious authority. Under the doctrine of Velayat-

e Faqih, as introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini, religious scholars or jurists are granted authority over both religious and political affairs, positioning them as temporal representatives of the Hidden Imam, or Mahdi (Khomeini, 1970). This doctrine has led to a greater emphasis on the veneration of the Imams, as well as the role of the clergy in guiding the community's spiritual and political life.

In this context, the growth of Arbaeen can be seen as part of a broader effort to consolidate Shiite identity and distinguish it from Sunni Islam. The theological emphasis on the Imams and their intercession contrasts with Sunni Islam's more rigid adherence to monotheism, creating a clear demarcation between the two sects.

Asura in Buddhism: Understanding the Realm of Demigods and Conflict

In Buddhist cosmology, Asuras are beings that inhabit one of the six realms of existence (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024d), specifically known as the "Asura realm" (also called the "realm of demigods" or "realm of jealous gods"). Asuras are often characterized by their intense envy, pride, and combative nature, which leads them to be in constant conflict with the Devas, the gods of the higher celestial realm. Despite their relatively powerful positions in the Buddhist cosmological hierarchy, Asuras are driven by negative emotions such as jealousy and anger, which prevent them from experiencing true peace and enlightenment.

Characteristics of the Asura Realm

The Asuras are depicted as mighty warriors who crave power and dominance. Unlike the Devas, who enjoy pleasure and serenity in the heavenly realms, Asuras are trapped in a perpetual cycle of violence and dissatisfaction. They possess great strength and often have access to luxurious surroundings, but their lives are marred by endless strife, primarily directed toward their celestial counterparts. Their suffering is rooted in their insatiable desire for superiority and

their inability to transcend the ego, a key barrier to enlightenment in Buddhist teachings (Harvey, 2013).

The Asura realm is sometimes described as a place of partial fortune. Although Asuras have accumulated good karma in their past lives, which granted them a higher rebirth than humans or animals, their existence is still riddled with suffering due to their unresolved negative emotions. This is consistent with the Buddhist principle of samsara (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024c), where beings are reborn in different realms based on their karma, and the Asura realm represents a state of existence that is neither purely suffering nor purely blissful (Keown, 2013).

Symbolism and Interpretation in Buddhism

In Buddhism, Asuras symbolize the dangers of uncontrolled emotions and desires, particularly anger, pride, and jealousy. Their constant battles with the Devas are allegories for the internal conflicts humans face when their minds are clouded by negative emotions. In this sense, the Asura realm can be understood as a metaphor for human struggles with the "three poisons"—ignorance, attachment, and aversion—that bind beings to the cycle of samsara (Gethin, 1998).

Furthermore, the Asura realm serves as a reminder of the importance of ethical behavior, meditation, and wisdom on the path to liberation. While Asuras may have acquired some merit, their inability to let go of their desires prevents them from attaining the peace and contentment associated with higher realms, such as those of the Devas or human beings who are on the path toward enlightenment.

In the Middle-East however, the Ashura reflects the love, devotion and the faith towards the higher being often considered as Imam Hussain or Imam Ali or the religious leaders. In any case, the conflicts and challenges proposed in both Buddhism and Shiite theology are the same, upon arising against superpowers and gods (Devas) (Davoudpour, A.R., 2024b)

The Political and Social Implications of Arbaeen's Growth

The expansion of Arbaeen as a global pilgrimage reflects the intersection of religious identity and political governance within Shiite communities. The institutionalization of the pilgrimage under the Velayat-e Faqih has not only solidified the role of the clergy in religious matters but also positioned the pilgrimage as a symbol of resistance against perceived injustice, particularly against Western powers like the United States and Israel (Dabashi, 2011).

In this framework, the Arbaeen pilgrimage becomes more than just a religious gathering; it is a demonstration of Shiite unity and strength in the face of global challenges. This dynamic has led to increased tensions between Shiite-led governments, such as the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Sunni-majority nations, as well as with the broader Western world. Theological and political conflicts are thus intertwined, with the Arbaeen pilgrimage serving as a platform for expressing both religious devotion and political defiance.

Theological and Philosophical Risks

The increasing focus on the veneration of the Imams and the authority of the clergy poses certain risks for the broader Islamic theological framework. As noted in classical Islamic philosophy, the manipulation of theological doctrines for political purposes can lead to a distortion of divine judgment and the path to salvation. According to traditional Islamic thought, divine judgment should be based on moral and spiritual principles rather than political expediency (Nasr, 2006). When religious authority becomes too closely aligned with political power, as in the case of the Velayat-e Faqih, there is a risk that the integrity of religious teachings will be compromised.

Furthermore, the elevation of figures such as the Ayatollah to quasi-divine status undermines the concept of the Mahdi as the ultimate redeemer of the Islamic community. The conflation of political and religious authority in this manner may lead to spiritual stagnation

and hinder the true realization of a utopian Islamic society (Shariati, 1980).

Conclusion

The growth of the Arbaeen pilgrimage and its increasing significance within the Shiite world is a reflection of both theological evolution and political strategy. While the pilgrimage serves as a powerful symbol of Shiite identity and resistance, it also highlights the divergence between Sunni and Shiite interpretations of Islamic worship and governance. The role of religious leadership in shaping these practices, particularly under the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih, has profound implications for the future of Islamic theology and political stability in the region.

The theological manipulation of the Imams and their significance in Shiite practice underscores the broader risks associated with conflating religious authority with political power. As the Islamic world continues to grapple with issues of governance, religious identity, and political legitimacy, the dynamics surrounding the Arbaeen pilgrimage will likely play an increasingly prominent role in shaping the future of the Muslim world.

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